

Writing for Recruitment

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Writing for Recruitment

Abstract

I dearly love the obese book titles used by an earlier generations of writers.



Address

Writing for Recruitment

An Exercise in Frustration for Fun and Very Little Profit

A Mostly Cynical, but Not Entirely Hopeless View

Terence L. Day

I dearly love the obese book titles used by an earlier generation of writers. You know the kind I mean, titles like the following, which was written in 16th Century England: *Mister Blundevil His Exercises, Contayning Eight Treatises, the Titles Whereof Are Set Down in the Next Printed Page. Which Treatises Are Very Necessary to Be Read and Learned of All Young Gentlemen, That Have Not Been Exercised in Such Disciplines, And Yet Are Desirous to Have Knowledge As Well in Cosmographie, Astronomie, and Geographie, As Also in the Art of Navigation, In Which Art It Is Impossible to Profit Without the Help of These or Such Like Instructions. To the Furtherance of Which Art of Navigation, the Said Mr. Blundevil Specially Wrote The Said Treatises.*

There was at least one asset in those bloated titles of old: By the time readers got through reading the title, they had a very good idea whether they wanted to read the book.

In honor of Mr. Blundeville and other authors of his generation, I have named this paper: *Writing for Recruitment: An Exercise in Frustration for Fun and Very Little Profit; a Mostly Cynical, but Not Entirely Hopeless View.*

Terence L. Day, news coordinator for the College of Agriculture and Home Economics, Washington State University, presented this paper at a Region A ACE Workshop, April 1985, in Portland, Oreg.

I'm not an expert on recruitment or writing for recruitment, but I am doing some recruitment writing, and I attended a CASE conference last April in Atlanta on "Successful Marketing and Recruiting for Enrollment Management," which had a strong component on writing. I share with you the gist of what I learned in Atlanta, plus a few personal observations about application of that knowledge in recruitment for land-grant universities.

I sought out the conference because I had taken on some responsibilities in writing for recruitment, because I didn't know anything about writing for recruitment, and because falling enrollment in the College of Agriculture and Home Economics, and at Washington State University, has administrators on the verge of panic.

Well, perhaps panic states it a bit strongly, but I can and do assure you that enrollment is very worrisome to administrators today. Our information department certainly is receiving more pressure to "help" recruitment, and perhaps yours are, too.

In our college, enrollment is down 30 percent from its peak five or six years ago. That's almost exactly the same as the national trend for colleges of agriculture.

As with so many other problems, administrators seem to expect a quick fix from the information department, in the form of a news release or a brochure that will magically make students flock to campus, clambering over each other to enroll.

I'm pretty sure that I could write news releases that would bring thousands of young people to campus, but I'm not sure I can make them clamber, or even clamor, to enroll. The headline on the story that would bring them running probably would say: "Free booze and sex offered at WSU Friday."

We need, desperately, to get the message across to our deans and directors of resident instruction that we are not the answer to their enrollment problems. We *can* help them with recruitment. We *can not* save them from themselves. We *can* only supplement and reinforce good recruitment programs. We *can not* lift the program above the administrators' performance.

This is the most fundamental message that I got from the CASE conference in Atlanta: *We must not permit, much less give rise to, the misplaced and false hopes of administrators that news releases or brochures increase enrollment. They do not.* Recruitment program, nor a replacement for a

recruitment program. At best, they only supplement and enhance the recruitment program.

We must be direct and honest in telling administrators that the reins to our college's enrollment destiny are in their own hands and that the information department is but one horse in a 36-horse hitch. We are willing to pull our darnedest, but if the combine is going to make it up the hill they're going to have to snap the reins to all 36 horses, and crack the whip on all 36, and cuss all 36 equally.

A second major observation out of the CASE conference was that we in the land-grant universities are neophytes in the college recruitment business. Compared with other kinds of institutions, "we ain't got a clue."

Only 5 of 75 people registered for the Atlanta conference were from land-grant universities, and I believe that I was the only one from a college of agriculture.

And this with enrollment down 30 percent.

Brigham Young University had three people at the conference. There's a lesson there, if we will take instruction. BYU has had a self-imposed enrollment for nearly 20 years. It turns away thousands of applicants every year. And they sent three people to a recruiting conference on the East Coast. They are serious about their recruiting goals, which are to improve the quality of their student body. They want their graduates to go into the world and make a name for themselves, and for BYU, and for the Mormon Church. They propose to accomplish this by improving the quality of their student body, and they have concrete, specific goals to help them achieve their purpose.

And what are our goals?

Ask your director of resident instruction. Or your dean. I'll bet their goal is a simple one: To stanch the flow of falling enrollment. The problem is, that's not a goal. That's a disaster in progress. Through *marketing* we can increase enrollment.

Historically, most of us in college of agriculture information work have had minimal involvement in recruitment, for which most of the information support is done by university-wide operations such as news bureaus.

Many of us don't wish to get any closer to recruitment, but some of us may not have a choice. Regardless of which category we fall into individually, some of us feel that we could make a contribution.

Let's not argue here whether college of agriculture information staffs *should* get involved in, or increase their involvement in, recruitment. Instead, let's discuss what we must know and do to succeed if we do get involved.

My strongest recommendation for those who find themselves in that position is that they get themselves to a CASE conference on recruitment. I would also recommend that they purchase a couple of important CASE publications: "A Marketing Approach to Student Recruitment," and "Attitude and Opinion Research: Why You Need It/How to Do It."

If we expect to succeed in the recruitment business, we must:

- Learn something generally about the recruitment business.
- Learn quite a bit about our own institution's recruitment program, both at the broad institutional level and at the college level.
- Educate the relevant administrators to have reasonable expectations from our professional services; or conversely, not to have unreasonable expectations.
- Limit our involvement in recruitment to those functions in which we have expertise and the resources necessary for accomplishment. And finally,
- If our college doesn't have its recruitment act together, we would be well advised to tell the appropriate administrators candidly that any effort that we expend on an ill-conceived, poorly-run recruitment program is a valuable resource wasted.

We must not be intimidated by our lack of training in recruitment. Most of the administrators responsible for recruitment in our colleges have little, if any, more training than we have. In fact, one of our problems is that university administrators, from the lowest level to the highest, usually have no formal training whatever in management. They are trained in their own disciplines of agronomy, horticulture, genetics, nutrition, sociology, etc. Recruitment, and other programs, suffer because of the failure of academicians to apply appropriate management principles to university administration.

It is a mistake for us to excuse ourselves from participation in recruitment programs on grounds that we aren't recruitment experts. I come to this proposition with the assumption that we are just as intelligent as administrators and other

faculty members. We can still learn, and we should welcome the opportunity. We don't want to run the recruitment programs, but we want to be equal partners in intelligently-conceived and administered programs.

Here are a few of the basics that we need to know about the general recruitment business.

First, recruitment is a business. There are public relations firms that do nothing else. Colleges and universities that take recruiting seriously—and that includes all of the private schools, which live and die by their recruiting efforts—conduct recruiting at a very professional level.

Next, they have concrete goals. (Increase inquiries by X percent. Increase applications by X percent. Increase enrollments by X percent. Concrete, goals, not nebulous, "we-gotta-do-something-about-enrollment" thinking.) They use a marketing approach. They have ways, means, and deadlines. They spend money on recruitment. Real money. Recruitment is a priority. It goes far beyond lip service and moral support. It's right there in the budget as an identifiable item, and it isn't peanuts.

Third, the big boys and girls rely heavily on research. They know who the competition is. (Do your dean and director of resident instruction know who yours is? Or are they only guessing?) Successful recruiters know what their institution has to offer and what today's students want. You will only know these things by research. Why are research-oriented colleges and universities so loath to employ research towards the solution of their own institutional problems? Do we believe in research, or don't we?

Successful recruiters know what their institution's reputation is with students, with prospective students, with parents of students and of prospective students, with alumni, with their own faculty. They know their strengths and weaknesses. The only way to know these things is through research. You'll find no shortage of people in your college who think they know the answers to these and other vital questions; but if they haven't done scientifically sound research, they don't know the answer any better than we do. And if they don't know the answer any better than we do, we and they are heading for a heap o' trouble.

Fourth, successful recruitment programs have built-in evaluative tools.

Fifth, successful recruitment programs are *managed*. The rest make do as best they can.

What do they manage?

They manage relationships. It was stressed in Atlanta that students are not buying "an education" when they pay their tuition, they are buying a relationship, and that people don't have relationships with institutions and facilities, they have relationships with other, individual, people. The most important element in recruitment programs (after research has provided guidance) is person-to-person contact, either face-to-face or by telephone. Personal letters are helpful, but are in a distant third place. Perhaps we should take note here of a danger, however, in letters. I find two major problems in letters. One is that many people who have access to word processing computers are not taking advantage of the capability that they provide for personalizing letters. The other is that many people use this capacity so clumsily that the result is just as bad as, if not worse than, if they had sent an obvious form letter to "Dear Prospective Student."

Six, successful recruitment programs produce results, not excuses.

What do we know about our own college's recruitment program—if it really has one? What do we need to know?

First, we need to get a copy of, and read, the document that outlines the program. What are its concrete goals? Who does what to whom, when, where, why, how, and under what circumstances? Who supervises? Who evaluates?

Second, we need to examine the research upon which the recruitment program is based, become thoroughly familiar with it, and apply it to our work in the program.

Several speakers at the Atlanta conference made the point that doing research takes courage. It takes courage because it identifies problems. Some people don't want to know what their problems are. Some won't even admit that they have any. These people are one of their own biggest problems, and one of their institution's biggest problems. Until you get over, under, around, or through them, you are severely handicapped in recruitment. Often the quickest and surest way to increase enrollment is to find out what students don't like about your institution, change it, and then let the public know that it's been changed.

Third. We must be scrupulously honest in talking about our college's assets and liabilities. Research is not to identify what we need to hide from the public and lie about. Its role is

to determine market (student) needs and expectations and institutional performance so the two can be brought into sync, and so the institution may inform the market of its offerings. Never promise more than your institution can or will deliver. Fourth, We must know how our college's program fits in with the university's.

Having obtained the background necessary to do so (and this doesn't require us to become experts in any of these areas of recruitment or of administration), we are ready to take an active role. And here's what we should do.

First, determine what we personally, and our department, can reasonably be expected to achieve for the recruitment program. That will vary with the recruitment program, with our own talents, and with those of other members of our department. It'll also vary with the resources that administrators are willing to invest through us.

Second, what are some of the specific things that we can do? The following, intelligently conceived and applied, can support recruitment goals; we already are professionally familiar with most of them: news releases, radio and television spots, direct mail, brochures, and advertising.

These are not listed in any rational order. Let's evaluate them briefly.

News releases. We have no control over whether news releases will be used, or how. They target a broad audience that defies description, except as they may be placed in specialty publications. Their primary purpose is public awareness. They can be used to call attention to, and thereby increase the effectiveness of, recruitment programs such as campus visit promotions, ambassador visits to high schools, faculty visits to high schools, scholarships, etc. News releases are a relatively ineffective tool for recruitment, but are worth including in the recruitment package as long as expectations of them are realistic.

Radio and television spots. If so placed, radio and TV spots probably reach a higher percentage of teenagers than most other media. Fairly specific audiences can be targeted by selection of the stations that they are placed with. But, like news releases, we have no control over whether or how they will be used. Too often stations air them at times that minimize their effectiveness.

Direct mail. This medium provides an opportunity for a high degree of targeting. There are hundreds of people selling up-to-date mailing lists of every imaginable description. You might try browsing through *Alvin Zeller's Catalog of Mailing Lists*, *Network Catalog*, and *Conner's List*. There's at least a fair chance that they are in your university library. I would especially recommend that you investigate *Peterson's Guide*, which offers a variety of lists especially designed for higher education. I question a recruitment program that doesn't use direct mail.

Brochures. By themselves, brochures aren't worth the paper they're printed on. One speaker at Atlanta said he would abolish recruitment brochures and put all of the money now budgeted for them into the high school visitation program. Other authorities say high school visitation programs aren't effective. I don't know what you do with conflicting advice—other than to expect it, and to evaluate it. At best, brochures are only a supplement to the recruitment program. They serve as a reminder of other recruitment activities and as a reference for information that someone may want to look up later—like the address of your admissions office. They help convey an image of your institution. Probably more damage than good is done to image by brochures. This is a personal judgment, based on the poor images so many brochures give. Too many are written and designed to portray the faculty as it perceives itself, or as it would like to perceive itself, instead of as students should perceive the institution. In other words, brochures should be written for prospective students, not for faculty, alumni or the industries that our institutions serve and that support us. One word about printed material: What appeals to prospective students will drive parents, faculty and administrators crazy. It will make some of them furious. Some of the speakers at Atlanta said they try hard to keep their recruitment literature out of the hands of alumni—although, of course, that's impossible.

Advertising. Advertising (newspapers, magazines, radio, television and outdoor) can be a mainstay of a recruitment program, or of little value. It can be used to mold public opinion, and therefore help you create or change your institutional image. I recently saw a Portland State University ad on Channel 4. A pretty young woman filmed on the streets of Portland says: "Portland State is my school; the city, my cam-

pus." I imagine that the ad is an effective one. Of course only research can tell for sure.

Land-grant universities have special problems in using advertising effectively, especially through mass media, because of its high cost and lack of audience specificity. High cost is largely attendant to our broad geographical bases. Community colleges use mass media advertising to great effect, partly because of their narrower geographic bases. As I recall, one community college administrator said his school draws 85 percent of its students from a 15-mile radius around downtown Kansas City. That makes it very easy to use mass media advertising for recruitment.

But we can, and I believe we should, use advertising. We only need, first the money, and second, the creativity to buy in narrow markets that will produce for us. For instance, instead of trying to blanket the entire state of Washington, we might go after the University of Washington on its very doorstep with outdoor advertising and a vigorous media campaign in Seattle. I say we might, but I don't think there's much danger that we will. I especially would like to see us advertising in high school annuals and in football and basketball programs. I don't know how many colleges of agriculture currently are using advertising in their recruitment efforts, but I am convinced that circumstances soon will force those that wish to survive to begin using this highly effective tool.

Whatever, we must remember that none of these tools constitutes a recruitment program, singly, or collectively. They are only supplements.

In summary, I hope I haven't been too cynical about the prospect of information department involvement in college recruitment. Clearly, I believe that much of our efforts are wasted, or at least their effectiveness is minimized, by our institutions' failure to apply the principles of management to recruitment. I do think we have a legitimate role to play, and that if we play it legitimately we can provide a valuable assist to the college and to the university. But if we are going to venture into this arena, we must learn something of it and we must be forthright in advising our deans and directors of resident instruction so their expectations of us, and of their recruitment program, are realistic. Too often, we in the information departments of the colleges of agriculture are too timid and do ourselves, our professions and the institutions that we serve a disservice in not telling administrators that the

involvement that they request of us is inappropriate or ill-fated.

To borrow an expression from The Ingersoll Group, a Denver, Colorado firm that specializes in college recruitment—management can change frogs to princes. But that's a job for managers, not for communicators.